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**How would employees ‘construct’ a balance between work and non-work life?  
Work-life Balance in the Construction Industry**

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## **How would employees ‘construct’ a balance between work and non-work life? Work-life Balance in the Construction Industry**

### **Abstract**

In recent years there has been a groundswell of research that overwhelmingly suggests extended working hours and the difficulty of balancing home and work are highly problematic for many employees. The paper adds to this literature by investigating work-life balance (WLB) issues and takes as its primary focus the time-based demands of jobs in the construction industry in Australia. This paper draws from two construction industry case studies that have experimented with restructuring working time arrangements.

We posit this analysis of working time arrangements fits within an employee voice framework as the study draws from the experiences and point of view of workers. Further, the research is framed by Kochan, Katz and McKersie’s (1986) Strategic Choice Theory. Study findings indicate that the employees’ suggestions to resolving the work life balance issues cluster around three themes. These themes are 1) the contractual arrangements; 2) formal and informal mechanisms for implementing work life balance at the worksite; and 3) individual preferences to take some control over their working time habits. The paper concludes that employee voice presents as an important resource for managers and policy-makers in determining WLB policies for industry, workplaces and individual employees.

## **How would employees 'construct' a balance between work and non-work life? Work-life Balance in the Construction Industry**

In recent years there has been a groundswell of interest and academic research investigating working time arrangements (including long working hours) and work life or work family balance problems and initiatives. Viewed in total, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that extended working hours and the difficulty of balancing home and work are problematic for many employees (Clark 2001; Dawson, McCulloch et al. 2001; Pocock 2001, 2003; Brett and Stroh 2003, Townsend, Russell et al. 2003). This paper adds to this literature through an investigation of work-life balance with a primary focus on the time-based demands of jobs in the construction industry in Australia.

The construction industry in Australia is characterised as exhibiting a long work hours culture and operates according to an extended working week as the industry standard. Typically, employees working six days a week and thirteen day fortnights is not unusual. The construction sector is a male-dominated industry and many companies adopt a project management approach to large construction projects. Adding to the difficulties in managing time demands in the construction industry is the location of projects in remote sites or in areas that take time away from families due to travel. Further, the projects tend to be large, complex projects that face deadlines or delays in completion. This paper draws from two construction industry case studies that have experimented with restructuring working time arrangements in order to unpack the notion of time demands involved in completing large project- based construction assignments.

Achieving satisfactory work-life balance is a multi-faceted problem and employee voice is a critical component of understanding the issues that may affect employee well-being and productivity. There are, however, limitations in focusing solely on employee voice to elucidate the concerns, characteristics and conditions of working time arrangements that impact work-life balance. It is argued, moreover, that many employees recognise the complexity of this issue and because of their organisational position at the interface of the workplace and managerial authority they are well positioned to provide potential solutions. Kochan et al's (1986) framework offers the possibility of exploring work-life balance at the individual, workplace and structural levels from the standpoint of the employee.

The findings of this study indicate that the employees' suggestions to resolving the work life balance issues may be organised according to three themes. These themes are 1) the structural or contractual arrangements as the specification of contracts in large projects may need to consider work-life issues up-front; 2) formal and informal arrangements as there is a need for both formalised company policies (including flexible arrangements) that are accessible in practice together with informal arrangements at the worksite; and 3) individual preferences need to be considered so that individuals can take some control over their working time habits while still meeting organisational imperatives. We posit this analysis of employee voice may be situated within Kochan, Katz and McKersie's Strategic Choice (SC) framework (1986) as it features the workplace and organisational levels of engagement as places of critical exchange relations.

Strategic Choice Theory is based on the notion that employer choices can be divided into three realms of activity: the top tier of strategic or long term planning; the middle tier or functional level of organisational policies; and the bottom tier of workplace level of individual/manager relationships (Kochan et al 1986). Employee's views of change required within the construction industry can be understood within a strategic choice framework, as the structural and contract decisions fit into the top tier; and organisational and workplace levels relate to organisational policies and individual choices respectively.

While the majority of employee views are covered within these themes, there is also evidence of differences between the issues confronting blue and white collar employees. Interestingly, while there are differences in the issues these two groups face, there is substantial convergence in the solutions offered by the two groups of employees.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three main sections. The first section provides an analysis of working time and work /life balance arrangements in Australia and within the construction industry. The second part introduces the case studies, explains their working time experiments and provides an explanation of the data collection process. Finally, this paper analyses employee voice as it relates to working time arrangements within the industry and within the case study sites. The paper concludes that employee voice presents as an important resource for managers and policy-makers in determining WLB policies for industry, workplaces and individual employees.

### **Work Life Balance in the Construction Industry**

According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) both time-based and strain-based job demands can interfere with employees' lives outside work. The time-based demands represent role-related time commitments, i.e. the amount of one's time that is spent involved in work. Because time is a limited resource, the demands of work have a direct impact upon one's work-life balance (Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshalk & Beutell, 1996). While Australia led the world in reducing working hours throughout the last 150 years, the last fifteen years has seen a reversal in this trend (Campbell, 2005).

In the late nineteenth century the union movement realised the benefits of having a balanced life with their 8-hour day campaign. Eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep and eight hours of leisure was seen to be a reasonable expectation for workers in a developed country. Time spent at work inevitably reduces the time that can be spent in other activities, such as spending time with family, involvement in sporting and community activities or socializing with friends. Long work hours have been consistently linked to difficulties in balancing work and personal life (Guerts et al 1999; Moen and Yu, 2000; Batt and Valcour, 2003). The relationship between work hours and work-life balance is reported to be strong and direct. For example, Tausig and Fenwick (2001) report that as work hours per week increased, employees' work-life balance declined sharply.

In the construction industry, long hours have been identified as a significant problem for work-life balance and employee well-being. Most construction sites operate on a six day week basis, with skilled and unskilled labour, professionals and managers

working excessive hours. The nature of work is also stressful, with tight deadlines and severe financial penalties if targets are not met (Francis & Lingard, 2004). A preliminary investigation of work-life balance among the employees of one large Australian contracting organisation undertaken by Lingard and Francis (2001) found that more weekly work hours was strongly correlated with employees' perceptions that work interfered with their non-work life in a negative way. This was a particular problem for the organisation's site-based employees who reported working longer, more irregular hours and enjoying less schedule flexibility than their counterparts in head office or regional offices. The average number of hours worked each week was 62.5 among site-based respondents in direct construction activity, 56.1 among respondents who work mostly in a site office and 49.0 among respondents in the head or regional office (Lingard and Francis, 2001). Perhaps, unsurprisingly, site-based employees in the same pilot study reported significantly higher levels of negative 'spillover' from their work to non-work lives and also indicated significantly higher levels of burnout (Lingard and Francis, 2004).

Lingard and Francis' study (2004) points to the importance of construction industry employees' subjective experience of work-life balance. Their results indicate that employee' perceptions that work interferes with family life acts as an important intervening variable between job schedule demands and emotional exhaustion. The authors suggest that one implication of these findings is that the reduction of work-family conflict, for example through the implementation of work-life balance initiatives, may be one way of protecting the well-being of employees in the construction industry.



The research discussed above supports the notion that working hours are strongly related to perceptions of balance between work and non-work aspects. It has further shown that this is particularly important for construction employees as their industry is characterised by long work hours. The next section will discuss two case studies where we examined work hours and work life balance in the construction industry.

### **The Case Studies and Methodology**

The data for this research project was collected from two alliance projects formed to construct infrastructure within the greater Brisbane region. Alliance projects require more than one organisation to cooperate in developing a tender, winning a contract and collaborating to ensure that the project is completed on time and within budget. This style of project management has a range of benefits over the more traditional 'hard dollar' contracts won by single organisations. Flexibility, innovation and collaboration between organisations with different skills are just some of the benefits commonly associated with alliance projects (Walker and Hampson, 2003).

The first of the alliance projects studied here and referred to as Case 1 began operations with an industry standard 6-day working week. The primary working time experiment in Case 1 was a shift to a 5-day working week.<sup>1</sup> The waged employees at this site changed from a 10.5 hour day to an 11.5 hour day to compensate for the loss of income with no Saturday work. Salaried staff (engineers, site manager) did not have a formalised change in daily working hours, but did shift to the 5-day working week.

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<sup>1</sup> There were two other work-life balance changes in this project; however they are not relevant to this paper's focus on working hours.

The second of the alliance projects studied here and referred to as Case 2 began operations with a 5-day working week. However, after four months the management group reverted to the industry standard 6-day working week. The reasons for the working time change included: pressure from the waged staff who were unable to make up the Saturday hours through the week and therefore were earning less money; labour market pressure when another construction site (6-day week) opened nearby and the waged staff shifted to this new site in order to increase their income; and project timeframe pressures. Obviously, these reasons are interlinked, and indicate that site and industry pressures may work against easily generalisable solutions to improving work-life balance.

Data was collected from employees at all levels of both case organisations through interviews. The interviews were one-on-one with an employee and researcher, and covered a range of work and non-work issues. Most interviews took between 20 and 40 mins to complete. In this paper we aggregate the comments from the two groups of workers (2 case organisations) within the construction industry. We believe it is appropriate to aggregate their responses as both groups have worked on a site operating on a 5-day week and a 6-day week. However, we report which case organisation the employee belongs to. The views employees offer as a means to resolve work life balance problems within the industry are recorded and analysed.

### **Different Pressures for Wage and Salary Staff**

Employees within the construction industry can be segmented in a variety of ways; however, the most appropriate segmentation for this paper is between the salary and wage earning employees. Salary employees are more likely to be university educated

professionals (such as engineers) and have long term associations with their employer. In comparison, waged employees can be skilled tradespeople or unskilled labourers and are often employed on a job-to-job basis. As such, loyalty for the wage earning employees can often be through their pay packets and working conditions, rather than the organisation.

Salaried staff appear to face two different working time experiences. If they are working in the head office, they will commonly work around ten hours a day, five days each week. However, once 'on-site' the hours are more closely aligned to that of the operational site hours, therefore their working hours extend to between 10 and 12 hour days and six days a week (or more). The take-home pay of these employees does not change regardless of the hours worked. In contrast, wage earners in the construction industry are covered by enterprise bargaining agreements which include penalty rates for overtime and weekend work. As such, two hours overtime each day (at time and a half) and six hours overtime on Saturdays can drastically increase (around 60 percent) the take home pay of wage earners.

It is obvious that the two different groups within a construction site would have different interests when it comes to control over working hours. While all employees face pressure to complete tasks, it could be argued that the pressure for the salary staff is greater due to their 'longer term' employee status (or aspirations) within their organisation. Interestingly, both salary and wage employees argue that there needs to be change within the industry. Understandably, each group has different interests in arguing for a better work life balance approach to construction industry jobs. The next section of this paper will focus on employee views of the top tier of change. That

is, change that is required at the structural level of decision-making over tenders, contracts and legislative regulations.

### **The Tender/Contract Level of Control**

There is a realisation by employees that if their company does not tender competitively, then quite simply, they will not have available work. This tendering process leads to workplace pressure that is not limited to private enterprise, although many employees suggest through their experience that government jobs face less of this pressure. The site manager at Case 1 case explains the current industry standard:

*If you are tendering for a job, if it is a hard dollar which is opposite to alliancing, then unless the client tells you that you will not work Saturdays and Sundays, then every contractor is going to allow in their price to work Saturdays – such that they can come in, and be more competitive in the fact that their overheads, their infrastructure, isn't tied up for that period of time.*

A foreperson stated in relation to the highly competitive tendering and specification process:

*'... they sit down and draw up a program. Every time they can shave a little bit more and a little bit more off it, it is more money, more profit. ... you feel obliged to push as hard as you can ... by meeting deadlines ... then next job they push even more ... compromise safety ... quality I think gets compromised a little bit.'* (Foreman, Case 1).

As such, employees understand that the issue of six-day working weeks is one for the industry to resolve, not just for their organisation. According to employees, there are

alternative routes to change at the tender or contract level of control. One route suggested by some employees is that these issues could be resolved through state regulation. Legislation that demands construction industry contracts to be offered on the basis of a five-day working week is put forward as a possible solution by some employees. However, Australia has a particularly low level of state regulation of working hours (Peetz, Townsend et al, 2003). Furthermore, state regulation is unlikely, particularly with the current Australian industrial relations transformation to a more flexible and individualistic approach and the Australian government's policy and legislative shift of decision-making and control to the workplace level. Some employees recognise the fact that this industry change would require legislation as there is unlikely to be agreement between construction industry companies when large competitive projects are proposed.

Another approach suggested by employees is that the construction organisation and the client must accept the importance of 'people rather than just dollars'. Part of this approach would require the clients to understand that 'sometimes the job might simply take a little longer' (Interview 4, Case 2). In addition, the construction organisation would be required to develop their tenders to ensure that the five-day week is to be adhered to regardless of time pressures.

Indeed, some employees refer to working on projects that had restrictions on working hours in place as part of the contract agreement. On balance, those employees who have experienced worksites that initiate WLB programs speak of the positive impacts of these initiatives on their lives and on the workplace.

### **The Workplace Level of Control**

Research has also demonstrated that in order for employees to experience satisfactory work-life balance, in addition to formal work-life balance policies, there is a need to ensure that support exists in the work environment (Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999; Allen 2001; O'Driscoll, Poelmans, Kalliath, Allen, Cooper & Sanchez, 2003). Lingard and Francis (in press) suggest that when practical support is lacking, construction industry employees experiencing conflict between their work and family lives are more prone to burnout than when practical work-life balance assistance is available. This finding indicates the importance of supporting co-workers and subordinates to better balance work and non-work lives in practical ways. In the two case studies presented here, employees support the view that it is the site manager's approach that determines the nature of control over working hours at a construction site. The following comments from employees reflect the role of management in setting a 'work life friendlier' workplace.

*They (managers) set the standards first up, everyone knows where they stand...you've got to be able to plan your family life, it's more important than your job. (Interview 2, Case 2)*

*Give the site manager a bit of a wrap. The fact that he's gone, 'alright, a five day week' – that's really good (Interview 4, Case 1)*

In addition, flexibility in working time arrangements and a flexible management approach was considered to promote better work life balance.

*I think a lot comes down to the project manager. How flexible he is... (Interview 5, Case 1)*

*This is the most flexible project I have worked on, by far. And it is the best I have worked on. Like I said, they are pretty flexible, don't stop you from doing something.* (Interview 6, Case 1).

The organisational level of decision-making is focussed upon the policies and practices in each particular workplace. These policies and practices are largely driven by managerial decisions. However, this level introduces the notion of employee decision-making which becomes more salient in the following section; the individual level of control.

### **The Individual Level of Control**

There is no shortage of literature that examines peer pressure within workplaces in relation to working hours, work effort or a range of other factors (Barker, 1993; Townsend, Russell et al 2003). Employees within these two cases report substantial levels of peer pressure within the industry in relation to working hours. Employees report pressure to be at work on Saturdays, even if there's nothing to do except read the paper. However, some employees tell of ways that this pressure is circumvented or ignored.

*...there's always pressure in construction, you always had the foreman saying 'come on, you've got to get this done before you go home' ... and in some circumstances they (the workers) would get really rebellious and say, 'no, knock off time is four o'clock, if you don't like it, sack me'. (Interview 6 Case 2)*

However, many individuals recognise the role they can play in taking greater control of their working hours, and consequently, their WLB. For example:

*...it's up to the individual, to make the most of it. You have to make sure you make the effort to go and see your kids play piano, or football ... or whatever ... you have to make the effort, otherwise they are growing up and you miss them. They come back and say 'where were you when I was doing this?' Take a few hours off and balance your life. (Interview 1, Case 2)*

Individual negotiation of time to undertake family responsibilities is a key component of work life balance. The formal and informal arrangements available to work site employees are critical to this endeavour as outlined in the following response:

*I've never had a problem here at all (with work time flexibility)...I just let them know I've got to do such and such this afternoon, I'll be back tomorrow morning. (Interview 2, Case 2)*

Long working hours has become so ingrained in some sectors of Australian life that employees who are working upwards of 55 hours a week will say things like 'I would still like it to be five days and shorter hours...but that would be asking too much.' (Interview 6, Case 1). The weight of evidence demonstrates the negative affect long working hours has on individuals, families, organisations and communities. In what can be described as potential good news for employees within this industry, many interviewees refer to a 'groundswell' of peer pressure to reduce working hours.

## **Discussion**



Strategic Choice Theory is based on the notion that employers may be involved in and make strategic choices at three levels of activity: the strategic or long term planning level; the functional level of organisational policies; and the workplace level of individual/manager relationships. Each organisation is obliged to make choices about their approach at each of these levels and indeed, decisions made at one level will impact upon, or constrain the choices available at another level (Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986). The employee views fit into a framework that reflects the different levels of choice for strategic actions.

Table 1 presents the three levels of control over WLB in the construction industry. Included in this table are examples of the actions that employees suggest are required at each level to allow employees to balance their work and non-work life more effectively.

**Insert Table 1 about here:**

The issue of work life balance is a complex and multi-faceted issue. However, the views of employees provide a way of understanding the diverse and challenging issues in relation to supporting work life balance in such a demanding industry as construction. There is no doubt that attempting to gain industry-wide support in such a competitive market is extremely difficult. However, alliance projects appear to provide for more freedom to initiate and experiment with alternative working arrangements. As such, the increasing use of alliances may be a positive way forward for WLB initiatives.

Some workplaces are already committed to improving the WLB of the employees. Research suggests that those workplaces are also reaping a range of positive rewards,

such as increased labour productivity, increased employee commitment, decreased OH&S concerns and lost time (Bradley et al, 2006; Townsend et al, 2003). The research found that WLB is a complex issue that should be addressed on multiple levels. It is not enough to rely on organisational policies to deliver work life balance initiatives. In the construction industry, the project-based structure works against a consistent working week, deadlines and delays cause project timelines to be tight and work schedules need to be highly flexible causing non-work time to be erratic and squeezed.

### **Conclusion**

While employees are in total agreement that there are work life balance problems within the industry, these employees see a range of possible factors that contribute to this situation and offered insights into alternative policy and process choices to resolve the problem. These solutions fit well into Kochan, Katz and McKersie's (1986) strategic choice theory framework of decision-making.

When viewed in total, employees suggest that there needs to reform on three levels. First, reforms must occur at the structural level of working time regulations and contract/tender decisions. This needs to happen at an industry level, as well as at the organisational level. Standards need to be developed that mean that contracting and tendering decisions are made within a framework that does not allow work hours to be excessively long. Second, organisations within the industry must make decisions that are more seriously focussed on the needs of their employees when it comes to work-life balance policies. These decisions should include providing flexibility for staff around working hours – at least in terms of some flexibility to have time away from the organisation when it is needed. Further, structured work-life balance initiatives

need to be included in the day-to-day life and activities of the organisation. Third, at the workplace, reforms must allow individuals the capacity to take greater control over their own work-life balance. Giving employees greater control of when and how they conduct their work will add significantly to their perceptions of greater work-life balance.

Future research could explore in more detail the different preferences and requirements of the white and blue collar workers to WLB arrangements. While maintaining wages is a key choice for the blue collar workers, there needs to be an in-depth study of the tolerance of the wage-time trade-off. The number of hours and starting and finishing time preferences may then be better matched to the life cycle of the site and give some certainty for workers in terms of wages and working time.

For white collar employees, the ability to manage work and non-work time is a more salient issue than hours/pay. Further research could be directed to understanding how the project nature of the construction industry impacts on the ways that WLB initiatives may be instituted. Research could uncover the ways that WLB may be translated from one site to another, such as whether these employees demand different conditions as they move across sites or whether there are site-specific arrangements that remain resistant to change. This research has found that employees recognise that there is no 'easy' solution to the issue and that there are many dimensions to the problem of balancing work and non-work life.

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**Table 1: Construction Employees' Three Levels of WLB Control**

	Level of Control	Action Required
Top Tier (strategic decision making)	Tender/Contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State regulation of contracts</li> <li>• Greater industry wide commitment to employee WLB</li> </ul>
Second Tier (functional workplace level)	Workplace Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide WLB initiatives for waged and salaried employees.</li> <li>• Ensure EBA provide for wages that retain employees if there is no Saturday work.</li> <li>• Ensure flexible working arrangements are available to the employees.</li> </ul>
Third Tier (individual relationships)	Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilise WLB initiatives when they are offered</li> <li>• Work according to the employees WLB needs rather than maintaining the workload of peers.</li> </ul>